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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE APPROVES CONCEPT FOR MARINE CENTER IN THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

The **National Park Service's (NPS) Development Advisory Board (DAB)** has approved the concept of the proposed **Salt River Bay Marine Research and Education Center (MREC)** at the **Salt River Bay National Heritage Park and Ecological Preserve (SARI)**, a unit of NPS on St. Croix in the United States Virgin Islands (USVI). The action, taken July 26 in Denver, enables the planning and design of the MREC to continue to move forward.

The MREC is a partnership among the NPS and the **Office of Insular Affairs (OIA)**, both units of the **Department of the Interior (DOI)**, the **Joint Institute for Caribbean Marine Studies (JICMS)**; and the **Government of the Virgin Islands (GVI)**. The JICMS is a consortium of four universities -- **University of North Carolina Wilmington; University of the Virgin Islands; Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; and University of South Carolina** -- that have worked together since 1999 to develop the MREC on St. Croix.

"This is the culmination of seven years of hard work," said SARI Superintendent Joel A. Tutein, referring to planning that began in 2004 with a feasibility study. "We are very pleased and excited that the MREC has been given full approval by the DAB to proceed with plans to design and construct the 61,000 square foot campus at Salt River Bay National Historic Park. The public will benefit from both the educational and research opportunities for long term scientific study of terrestrial, marine and archaeological resources at Salt River Bay."

"The collaboration among the Department of the Interior (DOI), participating universities, and the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands is fast becoming a model of partnership for projects which require a comprehensive approach among government, academia, and a local community", said DOI Assistant Secretary Babauta. "The MREC will be a smart, sustainable facility, incorporating as many renewable and alternative energy technologies as available, opening up the doors to ocean and coral reef research while being mindful of the cultural and historical values of the people of the Virgin Islands."

Said Robert Wicklund of UNCW, who brought the JICMS together during the 1990s: "After a long journey, our dream of bringing a new marine research and education facility to St. Croix has reached a milestone with the approval of the Development Advisory Board. This program will address the many ocean issues so important to the Virgin Islands and all of the West Indies. I look forward to completing the building phase of this project and to beginning our mission."

"It will be a proud moment, indeed, for the many people, institutions and governments who have worked so hard to keep this project moving when the ribbon is finally cut," Wicklund said.

The partners recently completed architectural programming and a master plan for the facility (funded by OIA), which will be located on Hemer's Peninsula adjacent to Salt River Bay on St. Croix's north central coast. The MREC will include wet laboratories, classrooms and lecture spaces, dock and diving operations, a museum collection/archive annex, living accommodations, and related support facilities. This predesign work was managed by NPS's Denver Service

Center and performed by a team led by Lord Aeck & Sargent, an architectural firm based in Atlanta.

The MREC campus will occupy about eight acres of the Hemer's Peninsula site, which was heavily disturbed during the 1960s and 1970s when a hotel and marina project was partially developed and then abandoned. The campus is planned to house 48 undergraduate students and 12 researchers/graduate students at one time. The program also includes 12 lab modules assignable to specific research projects.

The \$60 million project required conceptual approval as part of NPS's *Partnership Construction Process*. The partners will continue to work together through the fundraising, agreement and development phases of the process. Construction will not begin until all agreements are in place and the JICMS raises the required funds.

About the MREC

The MREC will (1) provide the means for researchers, resource managers, educators and students to collaborate on issues affecting tropical and subtropical marine ecosystems — focusing on the coral reef; (2) enhance the research and educational capacity of the partners within the USVI; (3) educate the public about natural and cultural resources through scientific study, educational programming and science-based resource management; and 4) serve as a model for sustainable building design

That SARI is the proper site for the MREC is reinforced in its enabling legislation. In 1992, Congress designated SARI to: "preserve, protect and interpret ... nationally significant historical, cultural and natural sites and resources ... with particular emphasis on the preservation of both the cultural and natural resources and long-term scientific study of terrestrial, marine and archaeological resources." [Public Law 102-247]

Submerged lands within SARI are the jurisdiction of GVI, which will be responsible for permitting the dock construction and sea-water infrastructure, and as-needed maintenance dredging of the channel into the lagoon for research vessel access.

In 2004, SARI, with funding provided by OIA, launched a feasibility study examining sites surrounding Salt River Bay. The Hemer's Peninsula site was selected as the preferred alternative, and an environmental assessment was conducted and completed in 2009.

About the JICMS

The mission of the JICMS is to establish a multidisciplinary partnership of academic, government and private institutions to better understand the sustainability and health of tropical and subtropical marine ecosystems in the waters of the Virgin Islands and other Caribbean regions through scientific studies, student education and public awareness of the economic and cultural heritage associated with coral reef systems.

The MREC will provide a platform for the universities to provide research and education programs in proximity to the resources being studied, and to do so in a campus environment that creates opportunities for synergies and collaborations among all of the researchers, educators and resource managers who will use the facility.

By creating a center of excellence in marine science within U.S. territory in the Caribbean, the JICMS can provide facilities and programming that serve the needs of researchers throughout the United States who want to undertake the types of research that can be supported at the MREC. At the same time, the close working relationships that will be fostered among the universities, NPS, NOAA and other Federal agencies and partners will increase the capacity of all of the partners to conduct research, educate the public, and manage the ocean resources of the USVI and the Caribbean.

About the Partnership

The JICMS has been working closely with its Federal and territorial partners since 1999 and intensively since 2009 to develop the MREC at SARI.

By locating the MREC within a national park, JICMS will be able to market the program to students in marine science, Caribbean studies and related disciplines as an immersion experience on St. Croix and an opportunity to work with NPS, local students and researchers leading ongoing, long-term projects benefiting the parks, the territory and the region.

NPS will benefit from capacity of JICMS to provide scientific, technical and logistical support of the stewardship mission of the national park units in the USVI. The research conducted and the data collected by JICMS are critical for science-based management of the more than 30,000 submerged acres, or 50 square miles, of submerged lands and coastline managed by NPS in the USVI. Moreover, as part of its proposed semester-long curriculum, JICMS undergraduates will assist park-focused research and outreach projects, providing hundreds of hours per year to NPS and GVI territorial parks' long-term research and monitoring programs.

By working together, the partners will create a unique facility that will provide significant benefits to the St. Croix park units, enable the parks to meet their research and resource management goals for coral reef and coastal restoration needs, and create a capacity to expand research and education in the USVI in the long-term, generating benefits that can be measured in the future as jobs, educational opportunities, and creation of future stewards.

For more information on the project, visit:

<http://www.doi.gov/oia/saltriver/index.html>

www.doi.gov/oia